

wight to

The Isle of Wight has miles and miles of off-road trails. With a day-return ferry ticket, map, camera, and backpack, **Luke Webber** went exploring

ride



Sometimes the packaged thrills from a trail centre are just what you want: two hours of intense riding, bike wash, coffee, home. Sometimes, even when the days are short, you want something more: a big day out involving a map, bridleways, and experiences to dine out on with your biking friends later.

It feels good to ride outside your familiar furrow, even when things don't go quite to plan and you find yourself riding home by moonlight on deserted trails, running low on food, water and a sense of humour. This feeling of pushing at your boundaries turns any normal mountain bike ride into an adventure.

Obviously we'd recommend that you be prepared and don't bite off more than you can chew. But when you're exploring somewhere new, you won't have all the answers ahead of time. The important thing is to go.

Perfect planning

The secret to a successful big day ride is having someone in the group who is an expert planner. You know, the guy who can fix bikes, read the map and discover a café in the middle of nowhere.

We didn't. We just had a destination: the Isle of Wight. A hasty look at the weather forecast the night before showed unbroken sunshine for the first time in weeks. Trails hardened with an upper crust of frost were all the invitation we needed. Checking out the travel arrangements I discovered we'd be out of the door before any sane person would be up. I made a frantic series of phone calls to convince biking friends to join up for an unforgettable day out of the office.

Our ferry journey from Lymington to Yarmouth was the wild-card element to the day. I just knew somebody would be late, misplace their ticket or miss-set their alarm. At least the wait gave us time for some last minute bike checks and route confirmation, freeing up time on the boat to do important things such as pre-ride fuelling with a great selection of English breakfasts.

As we wiped baked bean stains from the map edge, the ferry docked and its drawbridge descended. Within moments our early start had paid off. Sunrise was just coming and the trails were empty.

Making tracks

From Yarmouth we planned an anti-clockwise, mostly coastal circuit. Navigation was simple at first: follow the bridleway, keeping the sea to the right. Behind us, the ferry was a silhouette in the distance.

The ride started at an easy pace. Then we gave in to early ride overconfidence and attacked the first climbs too hard. Pacing ourselves was a distant memory. Still, we got to mark our territory, making the first tyre tracks on a trail that clearly hadn't been ridden for a long while.

Finding the first landmark was easy too: we were heading for The Needles, off the west tip of the island. Soon we could see and hear crashing waves against the three castaway chalk stacks.

The first real descent of the day at The Needles was a chance to test some trails that are very different from what's on off just four miles away across the water on the mainland. While the New Forest and surrounding area is noted for a lack of hills, the Isle of Wight is the opposite. Here you would struggle to find any path, trail or road



Bridleways along the chalk clifftops provide great views, but are obviously exposed to the prevailing wind. The riding itself isn't technical: you just need to be aware of the edge!

All photos by Luke Webber

without undulation. Often the topography is straight down and up. With little in the way of twists and turns, we stayed off the brakes as much as possible to carry our speed for the first few seconds of climbing up the far side of the dips.

Heading for history

While the bridleway was anything but sinuous, there were plenty of turns of a different sort. The Isle of Wight is England's smallest county (except at low tide, when it's the second smallest), yet within it there is a very concentrated network of public rights of way. As 165 miles of them are bridleway, there's a great amount of choice when it comes to exploring the Island. Our map – OS Landranger 196 – was essential.

More than half of the island has been designated an Area of Natural Beauty. And if you're interested in places-to-see type riding, the Isle of Wight has plenty to offer too. Carisbrooke Castle on the outskirts of Newport, the county town, was created in the wake of the Norman conquest. Osborne House (near East Cowes) was a retreat for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and is now an English Heritage property. Literary greats Dickens and Tennyson were, respectively, temporary and permanent residents on the island. Any ride could easily become a loop of historical hotspots. We spent most of our time on our bikes, although we did visit the monument to Tennyson on the southern edge of the island.

At Compton Bay we turned away from the coast and headed inland. We were soon in the largest wooded

area on the island: Brighstone Forest. What this small enclosure provided in respite from the wind, however, was undermined by tracks that were muddy, sodden and dispiriting on our winter's day. By summer it will no doubt be a dusty playground bathed in dappled sunlight...

We were already tired. Riding on the coast means you're exposed to the wind, and riding over heavy grassland is hard going. Our pace was steady at best. We needed to stop and eat.

Finding food at this stage outside of the tourist season meant that our choices were restricted to refuelling the traditional way: fish and chips. With Brighstone mud welded like concrete to our legs, we headed for the seafront at Blackgang Chine. There we all wolfed down a large portion of deep-fried haddock and chips, with only the blue rinse brigade for company, rain caps fluttering in the wind.

Last legs

Getting started again was hard, as it always is. Your legs never feel the same again no matter how many times you try to rub energy back into the muscles. By now every hill seemed like a mountain. What was once beautiful rolling countryside turned into a bleak endless horizon.

"We wiped baked bean stains from the map as the ferry docked and its drawbridge descended"

We stopped regularly to read the map, not just so that we could make sure we didn't end up riding out of our way but so we could benefit from the rest.

The plan was to ride from Chale to Newport. Cutting across the island rather than following the coast round wasn't as easy as it looked. The rolling hills kept coming, and there were lots of adjoining bridleways. We didn't want to return to the ferry by tarmac road. We had come to explore the island's off-road routes and meant to do just that.

We were all out of drinking water but kept going because we had a ferry to catch. We each climbed into our own little zones, pedalling easier gears like metronomes. Little was said. Every now and then someone gave a nod or a half-hearted push.

The ferry trip back was quiet. All three of us had thousand-yard stares, sitting around in energy-saving shutdown mode. When we docked, we were asked to walk our bikes while disembarking. We did, with wry smiles: for once, walking felt easier.

From Lymington, we still had to get back to Southampton. Bodies went into autopilot, everything but getting to food and bed forgotten.

We've reminisced already. Like a drunken night out, memories return, some of them embarrassing, some of them strengthening the bonds of friendship. We've already resolved to have another go – just better prepared, fitter, faster and with a longer route planned... in summer, on a perfect sunny day, with dry trails and more determination.



Fact File Isle of Wight off-road

GETTING THERE: Southampton and Portsmouth are both mainline railway stations easily accessible from across the country. Lymington is easily reached from either city via Brockenhurst. Road links are good with the M27, M3 and A31. Routes through the New Forest to Lymington get busy during summer – allow extra journey time.

ACROSS THE WATER: Ferries leave regularly and daily from Portsmouth, Southampton and Lymington, crossing to Ryde, Cowes, Yarmouth and Fishbourne. Operating companies are Wightlink (www.wightlink.co.uk, tel: 0871 376 3432) and Red Funnel (www.redfunnel.co.uk, tel: 0844 844 9988). Foot passengers travel for around £10 return.

DISTANCE: You could make a loop from 10 miles to 50 or more.

TERRAIN: Hilly and especially rolling, mainly chalk and grassland trails on open ground which dries quickly but can be lethal when wet. In the few wooded areas conditions become boggy through winter. Some road riding will be necessary but off-season both roads and trails are quiet.

MAP: OS Landranger 196.

NAVIGATION: The island is a great place to take your first mapped ride. Coastal navigation is simple and inland most tracks are well marked with obvious destinations.

ACCOMMODATION: Start early and finish late and you might not need any. If you want to stay over, it's best to book well in advance during summer months. In winter, some places will be closed.

BIKE SHOPS: Wight Offroad, Sandown; Wight Mountain, Newport.

EVENTS: 19-27 September sees the Isle Of Wight Cycling Festival, including the infamous '14 Hills Challenge' (www.sunseaandcycling.com)

FURTHER INFORMATION: www.islandbreaks.co.uk, Isle of Wight Tourist Information Centre, tel: 01983 813813

ESSENTIAL KIT: Take a good variety of clothing across to the island and somewhere to put it. The ferry journey can be cold and the high ridges along the coast exposed, windy and sheltered from sunlight on shorter days. That said, conditions are changeable so expect to be constantly swapping layers on stop-start rides.

BIKE: Generally the trails are easy to cover on any good mountain bike, with few really technical sections. Make sure the gears are working well as there are few flat sections. In winter mud tyres may be overkill for the grassy downs but are essential for any eroded, exposed chalk and woodland singletrack. Avoid semi slicks. Take the usual spares – multi-tool, chain breaker, pump, tubes. An extra innertube is a very good idea if you are riding in gorse season. Oh, and don't forget somewhere safe to store your ticket: a sweaty jersey pocket is far from ideal!